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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

- [1](#)1. Syria
- [1](#)2. Mideast

Key Stories in the Media:

Yediot headlined that Prime Minister Ehud Olmert talked to US

President George Bush six weeks ago and received from him the ok to go ahead and open negotiations with Syria. According to the paper PM Olmert conveyed through secretive channels a message to President Assad saying in exchange for full peace with Israel and dissolving the alliance with Iran and with the terror organizations, Syria would receive the Golan. The paper cited a senior political source as revealing that Bashar Assad has still not responded to Olmert's message. In an interview to Israel Radio Minister of Trade, Eli Yishai, said that if President Assad is serious then he should come to Israel.

Maariv reported that a day after Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared that Israel is willing to talk to Syrian President Bashar Assad, a Syrian source said that Syria is willing to return to negotiations for peace. Yediot also cited a senior Syrian official as saying that Syria is willing to talk with Israel but that they are not optimistic.

Yediot reported that PM Olmert will meet P.A. Chairman Mahmoud Abbas in Cairo on June 25. The paper noted that on the same occasion PM Olmert will meet Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Leading media cited Minister of Transportation and Road Safety, Shaul Mofaz, as saying after his meetings in Washington regarding Iran that the diplomatic track is preferable but that if that does not achieve the goal then all options should stay open.

Ha'aretz reported that Israel will not ask to widen the mandate of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) in the Golan. The mandate is automatically extended every six months and despite the tension with Syria, Israel will not ask the UN to reinforce UNDOF to ensure that the status quo is maintained. Ha'aretz cited a statement released by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in which he expresses shock and dismay at the comments made this week by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad forecasting the destruction of Israel.

Israel radio reported that two Qassam rockets were fired towards the southern town of Sderot. No casualties or damage was reported.

Ha'aretz reported that the IDF is only partially implementing the directive of Defense Minister Amir Peretz to end the ban on Palestinians entering the Jordan Valley. According to the paper the IDF last week began allowing Palestinians who do not live in the Valley to pass through the checkpoints but only on foot.

Maariv printed the results of a TNS/Teleseker Polling Institute survey:
-"What is your position regarding withdrawal from the Golan Heights for peace with Syria?"
Object any withdrawal: 44 percent; support only partial withdrawal: 40 percent; support full withdrawal: 10 percent.
-"Do you believe Assad's call for peace?"
No: 74 percent; yes: 17 percent.
-"Do you support the renewal of negotiations with Syria?"
Support: 45 percent; oppose: 48 percent.

1. Syria:

Summary:

Senior commentator Nahum Barnea wrote in the popular, pluralist Yediot: "Israel's diplomatic legacy is unequivocal: Israel has never said no to an Arab party that has expressed willingness for negotiations. It has sometimes evaded negotiations by creative excuses ... but it has never said no outright. Olmert cannot say no either. That is why he was forced to announce this week festively that he invites Syria to direct talks. It is doubtful whether an arrangement will come of this, but perhaps we will get through the summer safely."

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "So who invented the story about

a war this summer? The weather forecaster? And what about the story that Syria is planning an attack on Israel? Did we get a fax from Damascus? Or is the army just covering itself in case it really happens because it cannot claim once again that it didn't know? I wonder what goes on at those government meetings in Damascus. Are they quaking in their boots or laughing their heads off?

Senior military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "If the Syrians 'hold their breath' and will not attempt to forcefully retrieve the Golan Heights in the next four years, they will 'enjoy' a 'nuclear umbrella' from Iran."

Senior columnist Dan Margalit wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv: "The impression is that Israel is being dragged to talks only after it is threatened with war.... After it declared that it will not negotiate with Syria, it became clear that reality is different. It is already there."

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit opined in popular, pluralist Maariv: "It is possible that negotiations [with Syria] will not ripen or not succeed. It is possible that the move would lead us to war. But the effort is necessary."

Block Quotes:

II. "June-July Heat"

Senior commentator Nahum Barnea wrote in the popular, pluralist Yediot (06/08): "Olmert is deliberating. He suspects that all the Syrians want is to extricate themselves without punishment from the Hariri assassination affair. He fears a Syrian misunderstanding that will deteriorate into war. That is what happened precisely 40 years ago, on the eve of the Six-Day War. Three prime ministers -- Rabin, Netanyahu and Barak -- held talks with the Syrians, and none of them succeeded in reaching an agreement. Why should he, Olmert, succeed where they failed. And what will Bush say. And what will Yvette [Minister of Strategic Affairs Yvette Lieberman] say. Israel's diplomatic legacy is unequivocal: Israel has never said no to an Arab party that has expressed willingness for negotiations. It has sometimes evaded negotiations by creative excuses ... but it has never said no outright. Olmert cannot say no either. That is why he was forced to announce this week festively that he invites Syria to direct talks. It is doubtful whether an arrangement will come of this, but perhaps we will get through the summer safely."

II. "Drowning its Sorrow"

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (06/08): "Drowning its sorrows. So who invented the story about a war this summer? The weather forecaster? And what about the story that Syria is planning an attack on Israel? Did we get a fax from Damascus? Or is the army just covering itself in case it really happens because it cannot claim once again that it didn't know? I wonder what goes on at those government meetings in Damascus. Are they quaking in their boots or laughing their heads off? Are they saying: If Israel says we're preparing to attack, maybe that means they're planning to attack? Is it any wonder that they are sharpening their sabers over there? And in the middle of all this, the papers are reporting secret talks between Israel and Syria. But maybe that is

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camouflage, too. Maybe there is some surprise attack in the offing, and the Syrians are honing their defenses? Actually, it sounds more as if the Winograd Committee's final report is drawing near and the government is drowning its sorrows."

III. "The Golan Race"

Senior military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (06/08): "Talk of a possible confrontation in the coming summer is the first stop in the long and tense path of the year of decision that we are entering. Apparently, someone on our side thinks that enough warning signs have accumulated for us to be alert. But it is doubtful that the

Syrians have any real interest in starting the confrontation now. They are not ready yet. If there is a confrontation in the summer, it could break out due to an error on the part of one of the sides. It could be a misinterpretation of a step taken by the other side. The headlines and statements by military figures and politicians could encourage an incorrect interpretation of one move or another, and that would ignite the fire.... If the Syrians 'hold their breath' and will not attempt to forcefully retrieve the Golan Heights in the next four years, they will 'enjoy' a 'nuclear umbrella' from Iran. For the time being the IDF is concerned from the point of no return in the Syrian army's build-up. In a theoretic world the IDF was supposed to present to the government the option to hit the enemy before it reaches that point. Not to wait until it decides to attack but to attack it first.... Today the termination of a 'preemptive blow' was erased from IDF's schools.... The army understands that there will not be a preventive war unless the Syrians make a mistake and start raging in the Golan"

IV. "Only Under Pressure"

Senior columnist Dan Margalit wrote in the popular, pluralist Maariv (06/08): "Israel doesn't have a serious option to avoid negotiations with any certified Arab source who declares his wish for peace. Inner and outer pressure will do its own. So will common sense. But the government is having difficulties. Because the loss of confidence at home and the fear that it would be dragged to concessions due to its weakness. There were years in which Israel mocked Arab countries saying their governments cannot talk peace out of fear for their own removal. Now Syria claims that that is the reason why Israel cannot do peace and no one disagrees with it. The impression is that Israel is being dragged to talks only after it is threatened with war.... After it declared that it will not negotiate with Syria, it became clear that reality is different. It is already there."

1V. "A Year Ago"

Diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit opined in popular, pluralist Maariv (06/08): "Up until a year ago entering negotiations with Syria was pretty simple. But at that time we were strong. Meanwhile the Second Lebanon War broke. Now we are weak. The Syrians feel confident.... The Israeli leadership is panicked. Winds of war are blowing in its face.... Olmert is embarrassed. He has no clue whether the Syrian deal is still valid. What is certain is that the price has gone up. If he was less arrogant and proud a year ago, everything could look different.... So now what we do? It's simple: stand up on the Knesset's podium and call upon Assad for an immediate meeting, with no preconditions. Say you know the price of peace and present Assad with the Israeli rate. Reach out a hand clearly, bravely, determinably for peace with Syria. Israel could never afford itself -- even when it thought that it is really strong -- to refuse peace.... It is possible that negotiations will not ripen or not succeed. It is possible that the move would lead us to war. But the effort is necessary."

12. Mideast:

Summary:

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "If what is happening in the Gaza Strip were to happen to Israel in the West Bank, we would be back in a situation like that during the War of Independence, and this could include the expulsion of terrorism supporters. Therefore, Israel must insist for now on isolating the West Bank, and it must also reject the security benchmarks plan proposed by U.S. security coordinator Major General Keith Dayton, as it is liable to lead to Hamas penetration of the West Bank."

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "In his speech this month, Bush should build on his insight that the Palestinians were 'treated as pawns' in the conflict. This is an obvious reference to the Arab states, which have used the conflict to distract from their own stagnant regimes."

Block Quotes:

I. An Israeli defeat in Sderot

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (06/08): "Even if we declare dozens of times that Hamas is under pressure and wants a cease-fire, it will not erase the fact that in the battle for Sderot, Israel has in effect been defeated.... Israel is experiencing something in Sderot that it has not experienced since the War of Independence, if ever: The enemy has silenced an entire city and brought normal life there to a halt.... The present government in particular, but its predecessor as well, has suffered a resounding defeat here. The government has not succeeded in turning bombarded Sderot into a national defense project. That reinforces the assessment that this government is incapable of leading the nation in a major military confrontation. It is also a defeat for the defense establishment, including the Israel Defense Forces.... Israel finds itself in a military draw with Hamas. That is a serious national failure, which in my opinion is worse than the failure of the Second Lebanon War.... If what is happening in the Gaza Strip were to happen to Israel in the West Bank, we would be back in a situation like that during the War of Independence, and this could include the expulsion of terrorism supporters. Therefore, Israel must insist for now on isolating the West Bank, and it must also reject the security benchmarks plan proposed by U.S. security coordinator Major General Keith Dayton, as it is liable to lead to Hamas penetration of the West Bank. Even if we achieve a real cease-fire in the Gaza Strip, at least one year of quiet should pass until the cease-fire is extended to the West Bank."

II. "Shift the Spotlight"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (06/08): "The US-Israeli talks this week took place with two scheduled events in the background: Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's White House visit on June 19, and a speech by President George W. Bush around June 24, the fifth anniversary of his landmark address calling for a new Palestinian leadership.... In his speech this month, Bush should build on his insight that the Palestinians were 'treated as pawns' in the conflict. This is an obvious reference to the Arab states, which have used the conflict to distract from their own stagnant regimes. Five years on, Bush should say that it is no longer the lack of a Palestinian state that is perpetuating the conflict, but the conflict -- in the form of the Islamic refusal to accept Israel -- that is blocking a Palestinian state. The weak and radicalized Palestinians cannot change this on their own; they need the Arab states to lead the way by taking concrete steps to make peace, which means accepting Israel. Though the Palestinians must still be held responsible for their own destiny, the spotlight that Bush rightly trained on them should now be shifted to the Arab states."

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